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RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 4303
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 2913
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 7478
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 1527
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4868
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DEPARTMENT FOR PA, NEA/ARN, INR/IC/CD, INR/R/MR:STHIBEAULT AND
JMCCARTER, VOA NEWS CA, NEA/PPD:CBOURGEOIS, AZAIBACK, AND
AFERNANDEZ, IIP/G/NEA-SA MDAVIDSON
WHITE HOUSE FOR NSC
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SUBJECT: Syria/Belgium, Syria/Iraq, Syria/Iran, Syria/Pakistan,
Palestinian Territories, Iraq, Lebanon (1/23)

¶1. Summary: Syrian papers on Jan. 23 reported President Asad's meeting on Jan. 23 with Anne-Marie Lizin, Chairwoman of the Belgian Senate. Talks centered on bilateral relations and regional developments. President Asad reiterated the importance of continuing Euro-Syrian communication and Belgium's active role in enhancing this communication.

Ms. Lizin hailed Syria's pivotal role in establishing stability in the region, pointing out the European vision regarding the situation in the region. Ms. Lizin also met with Gen. Bassam Abdul Majeed, Minister of Interior, who voiced Syria's readiness and keenness to cooperate with all brotherly and friendly countries in order to combat terrorism and pointed out Syria's efforts in this regard. Gen. Abdul Majeed also talked about the procedures taken by his Ministry to control the borders with Iraq. He underlined the importance of the European role in this regard, indicating that Syria has requested many sides to provide it with modern equipment for controlling and monitoring borders but has so far received no response.

On Syrian-Iraqi relations, papers reported that VP Shara received on Jan. 22 a delegation representing the Arab tribes in Iraq. Talks dealt with the ordeal the Iraqis are passing through and Syria's role in achieving national reconciliation there. In this regard, VP Shara confirmed Syria's concern about the unity of the Iraqi people and land and confirmed Syria's work to overcome the current situation, expressing readiness to do whatever possible in this regard.

On Syrian-Iranian relations, papers reported FM Walid Mouallem's visit to Iran and his meeting with Iranian FM Manouchehr Mottaki. FM Mouallem is expected to deliver a message from President Asad to President Ahmadinejad.

Papers also reported that Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf will pay a working visit to Syria on Jan. 23 for talks with President Asad on developments in the Middle East. The visit is part of a regional tour including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the UAE. Talks in Syria will center on developments in the Palestinian territories, Iraq and Lebanon, bilateral relations, and a number of issues in connection with the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

As for the Palestinian issue, papers reported that Fatah and Hamas will resume talks today on forming a national unity government. Papers also reported that Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas held a meeting with a delegation from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command [PFLP-GC] headed by Deputy Secretary General Talal Naji. Talks focused on a number of Palestinian issues and the need to overcome the differences that harm Palestinian national unity.

A number of articles of interest appeared in the January issue of the independent English-language monthly magazine "Syria Today." One is by Ibrahim Hamidi, entitled "The West Has Fallen in Love with Syria Again." Hamidi charts Syria's tumultuous relationship with the West and its success in dealing with regional developments and confronting increasing pressures. Hamidi says that "[w]hile the picture that is beginning to come into view seems rosy for Syria, there is a possibility that Syria might face civil wars on three fronts, namely, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine," which "would spell disaster for the region and Syria in particular." Another article, by Ziad Haidar, is entitled "Steps Towards a Liberated Media Sector," in which he maintains that 2006 was supposed to herald a new age in independent media, but reform of Syria's media sector still lacks focus as well as a collective will. Haidar notes that "limits on official media are tighter and the threat of punishment is more serious," and that "the independent media is tightly controlled by the government." A third article, entitled "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," by Dalia Haidar, maintains that NGOs have had notable influence on Syrian social and political life, but that many NGOs are trapped in the rift between a secular state and a growing Islamic wave.

End of summary.

12. Selected Headlines:

"President Asad to Chairwoman of Belgian Senate Lizin: Instability in the region affects Europe negatively. Ms. Lizin: Syria has a pivotal role in stability in the region" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 1/23)

"President Asad and Iranian President Ahmadinejad exchange messages. Ahmadinejad: No limits to our relations with Syria. FM Mouallem discusses regional developments and bilateral relations with FM Mottaki" (Government-owned Tishreen, 1/23)

"VP Shara to Iraqi tribes' delegation: Syria is concerned about Iraq's territorial integrity and sovereignty" (Government-owned Tishreen, 1/23)

"Brazilian President Da Silva receiving Information Minister Bilal: We support Syria's right to restoration of the occupied Golan" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 1/23)

"President of Pakistan Musharraf arrives today in Damascus" (Government-owned Tishreen, 1/23)

"A general strike in Lebanon to topple Feltman and his satellites. Hizbollah leader Nasrallah: The government seeks international forces to salvage itself" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 1/23)

"Positive atmosphere following the meeting in Damascus of Palestinian President Abbas and Chairman of the Politburo of Hamas Movement Mishaal. Talal Naji, Deputy Secretary General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command [PFLP-GC]: The gap between Fatah and Hamas is narrowing" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 1/23)

"Three US soldiers killed in al-Anbar and Ninwa; scores of Iraqis killed and injured in various explosions in Iraq" (Government-owned Tishreen, 1/23)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"Syrian Vision"

Muhammad Khayr al-Jammali, an editorialist in government-owned Al-Thawra wrote (1/23): "In its actions and policies, Syria proceeds in the higher interest of the Arab nation and the need to protect it from external and internal threats....

"In his meetings with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Damascus recently, President Asad reaffirmed this national Syrian position when he announced that Syria is ready to do everything it should to render the Iraqi national reconciliation process successful and when he stressed the need for the Palestinian people to demonstrate cohesion at this delicate juncture and to adopt dialogue as the only language among the Palestinian factions to form a national unity government.

"For Syria, Iraqi national reconciliation and Palestinian unity are the only way out of the Iraqi and Palestinian crises.... The threat that Iraqis and Palestinians are facing is the same, a threat that ultimately targets Arabs' national security and common future.

"In Iraq, the people's political, geographic, and spiritual unity is threatened because undermining this unity is the only guarantee for the occupation to stay, dominate Iraq, and continue to loot the country's resources and control its strategic location.

"In Palestine, national unity is also targeted because it is the solid ground on which the struggle of the Palestinian people has been based and is the guarantee for foiling Israel's expansionist plans.... Without national unity in Iraq and Palestine the threat to the two peoples and the entire Arab nation will grow and expand."

"Reconciliation"

Umar Jaftali, a commentator in government-owned Tishrin, wrote (1/23): "All Palestinian factions are expected to resume talks on forming a national unity government....

"There is an opportunity to heal the rift and put an end to all signs of sedition among Palestinians.... National Palestinian unity is the only way to confront the siege, starvation, and daily crimes that the occupation government and forces are practicing against Palestinians....

"It is no secret that the international pressure on the Palestinian people and their elected government is intended to subject them to American and Zionist diktats.... Any political position that does not serve the real Palestinian interest or help Palestinians unify their efforts and renounce their differences would be a gratuitous gift to the Israeli enemy....

"Israel does not really want peace.... It is using the time factor and the available opportunities to perpetuate the occupation and further tighten the noose on the Palestinian people. This is why national unity remains a guarantee for the Palestinian cause."

"Will Bush Deem It Right, Even Though Late?"

Izz-al-Din al-Darwish, an editorialist in government-owned Tishreen, wrote (1/23): "Early answers from Iraq prove that there is no chance for the success of President Bush's strategy. The growing losses among US soldiers and the deteriorating security situation in that country are the result of the implementation of President Bush's new strategy....

"President Bush is not likely to enjoy his vacation. The bad news from Iraq will deprive him of sleep and drive his adversaries to escalate their attacks on him....

"Americans, headed by legislators in the Congress, believe that their national and ethical duty dictates that they confront Bush's war plans and bring their troops back from Iraq. Opposition to the Iraq war, as shown by opinion polls, has reached a level that Bush did not expect, exceeding 68 percent. And America's wise men, represented by the Baker-Hamilton committee and the military experts, presented written advice, did what they should when they stressed the need to stop the war on Iraq, and cleared their conscience before their people.

"Yet, President Bush insists on continuing and escalating the war, leaning on the advice of the remaining neoconservatives, who became shameless after losing the sense of national loyalty and took it upon themselves to turn the US Administration into an Israeli tool...."

Corbin